Jatin Mukherjee (1879-1915) and Indo-German Conspiracy (1914-1918)

Prithwindra Mukherjee, Paris

I

WHEN ON SEPT. 9, 1915, Jatin Mukherjee fought against a detachment of British Police, and fell at the battle of Balasore, Godfrey Denham of the Central Intelligence Department sent a detailed report about the fight and the "glorious death"[1] of Jatin Mukherjee to Cleveland (Dir. of Criminal Intelligence, Central Govt.); Jatin Mukherjee was qualified therein as "perhaps the boldest and the most actively dangerous of all Bengal revolutionaries."[2] Almost a verbatim repetition of this remark is found in the telegram sent on Sept. 15, 1915, by the Viceroy Hardinge to Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State: "Bengali first killed turns out to be well-known absconding political criminal Jatin Mukherjee, probably most active and dangerous of Bengal revolutionaries... Evidence shows that this party of five Bengalis was concerned in German plot for sending arms to India in association with others of their party, some of whom have been arrested during past month."[3] In reply Chamberlain cabled: "I presume that every precaution has been taken to prevent disclosure through the Press...." And in his letter dated Oct. 29, 1915, Chamberlain assured Hardinge: "Thank you for the Papers about the German Arms Plot. I shall have them put away under lock and key in our secret department."[4]

Apparently, Jatin Mukherjee led the life of an ordinary Indian : a decent employment at the Bengal Secretariat; a happy family with his widowed elder sister Vinodebala, his devoted wife Indubala, his daughter Ashalata and his sons Tejendra and Birendra; an intense spiritual

seeking initiated by personal contacts with Swami Vivekananda and guided by Guru Bholananda Giriji of Hardwar... "Like those giant whales living in deep waters only, rare were the occasions when Jatin Mukherjee came out on the surface"[5] : such was his strict loyalty to the principles of the secret societies which he had himself created. Though he had met Sri Aurobindo in 1903, the date of his assuming political leadership of the Extremists' Party ("Yugantar") is usually accepted to be the Alipore Case (May, 1908). But according to Hemendra Prasad Ghose, Sri Aurobindo's associate in the editing of the Bande Mataram, Jatin Mukherjee "was soon holding the Party together in a perfect discipline nearly for ten long years."[6] And Sri Aurobindo himself considered Jatin Mukherjee to have been his "right-hand man," one of his "most trusted lieutenants, a wonderful man who would belong to the front rank of humanity; such beauty and strength combined into one I have not seen. His stature was like that of a warrior."[7]

Except for attending[8] the conferences of All-Bengal revolutionary leaders held twice - in 1906 and 1907 - at the house of Raja Subodh Mallik and presided over by Sri Aurobindo, mostly Jatin Mukherjee's public picture resembled too much of a social phenomenon : protecting the helpless 'natives' against the spite of conceited 'white skins'; raising volunteers to relieve the destitute during floods and epidemics, or to maintain order during the large religious congregations such as the Kumbha-mela; giving away in charity the last piece of coin he had on him; nursing helpless patients, taking them home, clearing their discharges in handfuls; with a serene face; helping orphans and poor students with not only facilities for their well-being, but also for their studies;

encouraging the creation of night-schools and polytechnique centres in the rural areas; ridding the village folk of the troubles made by a Royal Bengal tiger, in 1906, by killing it almost in an improvised man-to-man bout (act which brought him the popular attribute of Bagha Jatin)...

For the first time when, in 1910, political charges were brought against him, his employer Mr. Wheeler could not believe that Mukherjee could have anything to do with such accusations. Yet, while Jatin Mukherjee and his followers were being tried in the Howrah Case, Hardinge came to India as Viceroy and took no time in singling out Jatin as a dangerous enemy of the British Imperial interests in India. In his letter to Earl Crewe (His Majesty's Secretary of State), Hardinge wrote on Dec. 15, 1910: "As regards prosecution, I (...) deprecate the net being thrown so wide; as for example in the Howrah Gang case, where 47 persons are being prosecuted, of whom only one is, I believe, the real criminal. If a concentrated effort had been made to convict this one criminal, I think it would have had a better effect than the prosecution of 46 misguided youths."[9] Then came the dismantling of the 10th Jat Regiment which had joined the seditious schemes of Jatin's men. In a letter to Valentine Chirol, Hardinge wrote on May 28, 1911: "The 10th Jats case was part and parcel of the Howrah Gang Case; and with the failure in the latter, the Government of Bengal realised the futility of proceeding with the former... In fact, nothing could be worse, in my opinion, than the condition of Bengal and Eastern Bengal. There is practically no Government in either province, but I am determined to restore order..."[10]

Before leaving Bengal for Pondicherry, in 1910, Sri Aurobindo left with Motilal Ray an instruction for his revolutionary colleagues: "Follow Jatin Mukherjee."[11]

7 Rare are the direct references made to Jatin Mukherjee in the records about the Indo-German conspiracy. "Hardly anybody outside the innermost circle ever suspected his connection" with much of what has been achieved, writes A.C. Guha: "secrecy was absolute in those days - especially with Jatin."[12] Beginning with Dr. Taraknath Das in 1905 upto M.N.Roy (or Naren Bhattacharya) in 1915, over almost a decade it was some of Jatin Mukherjee's emissaries who held a key position in the international chain-work to overthrow British dominion in India. In keeping with Sri Aurobindo's motto - "neither an impotent moralist nor a weak pacifist"[13] - Jatin Mukherjee was not however "the embodiment of the mediaeval values of warlikeness and heroism," warns us M.N.Roy.[14] Jatin Mukherjee held that in order to awake patriotism in a country for over centuries in bondage, a passing phase of violence was indispensable, before attaining the true basis of a peaceful popular resistance. This violence had to be practised not only against symbols of exploitation and tyranny, but also against the fear of death couched in the subconscient of a nation in slavery : some kind of self-sacrifice was demanded by the situation. "A nation is entitled to attain its freedom by violence," writes Sri Aurobindo, "if it can do so, or if there is no other other way.... Sri Aurobindo's position and practice in this matter was the same as Tilak's and that of other nationalist leaders who were by no means Pacifists or worshippers of Ahimsa."[15] In fact, Dr. Jadugopal in his reminiscences of the revolutionary days, portrays

Sri Aurobindo as Mazzini, Tilak as Cavour and Jatin Mukherjee as Garibaldi of India.[16]

Whereas under the newly passed Defence of India Act, several new charges of anti-British activity were brought against Jatin Mukherjee, Henry Wheeler (Secretary to the Government of India) helplessly wrote in a confidential letter on May 24, 1915 that Jatin Mukherjee "cannot be traced in spite of the offer of a reward of Rs.2500 for his arrest. He is believed to visit Calcutta occasionally in disguise but as he is a man of desperate character and always carries arms, it is difficult to find informers who will watch for him (so the Bengal Government report).[17]

On receiving the confirmation about the coming of the ship-loads of German arms from the USA, Jatin Mukherjee had to leave Calcutta with a handful of followers : as soon as the consignments came, they were to distribute those all over the country before the rising could be declared.

While in Calcutta, Jatin Mukherjee was seen meditating at the dead of the night : his eyes fixed at the sky, he used to go to a trance and tears flooded his cheeks. On reaching Balasore, despite a very busy time-table, Jatin Mukherjee used to retire in the forest and meditate before the setting sun. Only one evening, breaking his silent communion, Jatin spoke out to an aged companion about the vision of Krishna he had been having. "He was kind and truthful as well as bold and uncompromising," recalls M.N. Roy. Jatin Mukherjee's "boldness stopped short of cruelty, and his uncompromisingness did not preclude toleration.... He tended to accept the reformed religion preached by Swami Vivekananda - a God who would stand the test of reason, and a religion which served progressive social and human purpose. He believed himself

to be a Karmayogi...and recommended the ideal to all of us. (...) Karmayogi means a humanist. He who believes that self-realisation can be attained through human action, most logically believes in man's creativeness - that man is the maker of his destiny. That also is the essence of Humanism. Jatin-da was a Humanist - perhaps the first in modern India."[18]

According to the expectations of the Berlin Committee, Jatin Mukherjee sent M.N.Roy to Batavia under the name of Charles A.Martin. Through the German Consul in Jawa and Siam, Roy made interesting acquaintances like theHelfferich brothers, Atmaram and the engineer Kumud Mukherjee. As foreseen, Roy established a system of coded telegraphic and wireless contacts mainly between Harry & Sons of Calcutta and the German representatives at Batavia and Bangkok. Back to Balasore in June 1915, Roy gave Jatin a detailed report of the activities in the Far East. Judging from Roy's information, the German authorities from Washington, New York and San Francisco had already purchased important lots of arms and ammunition: these were to be sent to India via Batavia in five ship-loads, of which the first was the S.S. Maverick. If it took the steamers too long to cross the Pacific, there were ample stocks of German arms and ammunition at a number of Asian ports, mostly ordered by the Chinese Government : these could be smuggled and utilised for India. As a token of German collaboration, Roy placed a heap of sovereigns at Jatin Mukherjee's feet[19] and showed on a map the navigable spots of Hatia, Rai Mangal (Sundarban) and Balasore, as noted by the Germans.

Having chalked out in minute details the programme of distributing the arms and declaring the long-expected

insurrection, the revolutionaries hoped that the steamers would arrive any day. Suddenly a Press-cutting from Siam reached the Calcutta head-quarters announcing the failure of the Maverick mission. After much deliberation, Dr. Jadugopal and M.N.Roy (in-charge of the foreign information branch) showed the cutting to Jatin Mukherjee. He glanced through it, "as though nothing tragic or important had happened....Then in a calm voice he remarked: God has rectified our decision We had wished to free India with the help of another foreign power. But our Country shall rise with its own strength...."[20]

Possessing "all the qualities of head and heart to be the Leader at this juncture,"[21] Jatin Mukherjee in his quick discernment had already viewed the course of events. He was sure that the British would do everything to crush the slightest attempt of the Indians to win their freedom. They would be further merciless when they would discover the Indian intrigues with the Germans in a common object of omitting the British during the greatest crisis of their Imperialism. Moreover, in spite of their insistence on the "disinterested" help they were giving to the Indians, the Germans had certainly some hidden motives behind their gesture, motives which a man of Jatin's calibre did not quite ignore. The Prussian militarist disciples of Clauzevits were intelligible enough in the eyes of an Indian leader conversant with the teachings of Kautilya. Jatin Mukherjee, realising that the second phase of India's revolutionary struggle - after having gained momentum during full seven years - was approaching its diminuendo. While, desperate, M.N. Roy and other associates wanted to pursue further possibilities of German help, Jatin Mukherjee showed a complete indifference to their proposal.[22]

He had decided to put a dignified end to his own life as an apothesis to the revolutionary movement which was his own creation. An end that would mark as well the beginning of the third phase of a same and continuous impulse to win freedom for Mother India.

The story of Jatin Mukherjee's death in Balasore in a pitched battle is rather well-known. When, mortally wounded and transported to Balasore Hospital, he looked at his bleeding body, and exclaimed before breathing his last: "Strange! .... Still so much blood left?.... Fortunately every drop of it has been shed in the worship of the Mother. It can never end in a failure...."

On learning about Jatin Mukherjee's self-undoing, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das was heard pronouncing in a tear-choked voice: "We have utilised the sacred Shalgram[23] image to grind mere spices." This indicates how greatly he valued the moral and spiritual personality that Jatin Mukherjee was.

II

WITH THIS PERSPECTIVE in mind, it has been possible for the present writer to consult in 1963 the documents and records of the German Foreign Office (internationally coded as the Deutsches Auswartiges Amt/Weltkrieg 1914-1918). As far as our knowledge goes, these microfilms were obtained from the National Archives, Washington. Having consulted these microfilms under the efficient guidance of Shri Bhupendrakumar Datta, we took down long-hand notes from the following Reels which seemed to correspond to the subject and the period of our research:

Reel 363: Files 50-51 (16/4/1913-28/2/15), British India (most of the Files missing when we needed them)

364: Files 52-58 (1/3/15-1/10/18), on British India (some files missing)

397: Files 1-11 (Aug. 1914 - 21/3/15)
398: Files 12-31 (22/3/15 - 11/9/16)
399: Files 32-38 (27/8/16 - 11/8/17)
400: Files 39-46 (12/8/17 - 16/11/18)
401: Files 47 (17/11/18 - 31/5/19)
" Files 1-4 (15/8/14 - 12/2/15) : Peace Negotiations.

} Activities & Instigations against our Enemies : India

Among the earliest documents, we come across heartening passages such as:

i) 7/9/1914: The German Foreign Office enquiring with German banks in Berlin and Hamburg (e.g. Egmond Hagerdon, owned by Hintze) about the branches they have in Near and Far East;

ii) 8/9/1914: Indians willing to come to Berlin : Prabhakar from Dusseldorf (ex-student at Heidelberg and Coln School of Commerce); Abder Rahman (University of Freiburg); Siddiqui (Göttingen);

iii) 9/9/1914: Von Oppenheim asks Zimmermann the name of a reliable person in New York, Chicago, Saint-Louis or San Francisco, "with whom Indians coming over from here can get into touch"....

iv) 9/9/1914: Von Oppenheim enquiring about the possibilities to get money sent to Calcutta, Bombay, Lahore etc. Also about Hamburger Dynamites & Co.

v) 16/9/1914: Report about Virendranath Chattopadhyay coming from Constantinople, "Extremely anglicised Nationalist, a Hindu from Hyderabad, speaking well German, French, English, well-bred gentleman. Should join the expedition to Afghanistan."

vi) 21/9/1914: Von Oppenheim's message toWesendonck; Neuenhofer wants to send the enclosed letter to Egmond Hagerdon & Co. (how to transfer 250.000DM in 3 or 4 instalments to India, by Oct.-Nov./Nov.-Dec.?)... Von Oppenheim proposes

that a German Consul in Holland must try to transfer through a Dutch bank to British India - via Java - 200,000 DM in 3 or 4 instalments before Oct-Nov-Dec.

viii) 12/11/1914: Professor Otto from Hamburg Colonial Institute advises Foreign Office to take note of the strait relationship between Germany and the Islamic world. The German Consul in Batavia would do better to issue messages through Muslim agents or Hindu nationalists over Singapore, Penang and Calcutta for North India. Get helped by Turkish legation in Batavia. Send agents from Germany to India with blessings from the Khilafat and Sheikh-ul-Islam. Two suitable persons available to go over Mecca to Gujarat. A reliable agent has to go to Constantinople to further these plans. 20,000 DM required.

viii) 7pp Summary of the Plans of the Berlin Committee;

ix) 15/11/1914 : "Duties of German Politics towards Asia (with special reference to India)".

x) 7/12/1914 : Ambassador Bernstorff through Lucius informs from Washington that Von Papen the Military Attache in New York had bought for India 11,000 rifles, 4 million cartridges, 250 Mauser pistols, 500 revolvers with ammunition ...

xi) 11/2/1915: Franz Von Papen informs that arms have been stored on board the Annie Larson ...

xii) 27/12/1914 : In a ciphered cable, the Foreign Secretary Zimmermann intimates Count Bernstorff that on behalf of the Berlin Committee Heramba Gupta was coming over to Washington to organise the purchase of arms, as well as to recruit Indians in the USA and Canada to join revolution in India ...

This golden overture of the Indo-German Conspiracy will slowly, in course of four long years, go on accummulating

false notes. Conflicting and selfish instances of gold-rush (of which Chandrakanta Chakraverty and Harish Chandra will be some of the most deplorable figures); endless vicissitudes and humiliation for sincere and genuine patriots (like Mahendra Pratap, Taraknath Das, Professor Barakatullah, Bhupen Datta); duplicity of German officials (like Hentig); adventurers turned into heroes (like Champakraman Pillai) and true heroes yielding to third degree methods (as in the case of Jodh Singh or Phani Chakraverty); projection of unsettled indoor passions on an international canvas (like provincialism or dissension between Indian Muslims and Hindus); frustration resulting into schizofrenia (as in Har Dayal); perseverence and lucidity promoting more tenacious revolutionaries to newer fields of experimentation (Chattopadhyay, Khankhoje, M.N. Roy) ... The cycle closes with the resolution of the Berlin Indian Committee on Dec. 6, 1918 to dissolve.

III

OUT OF THE ASHES of the martyrs of this second phase of Indian revolution, arose the phoenix of Time-Spirit and guided, decade after decade, the soul-quest of India's masses to attain independence. The further highlights of this Time-Spirit are remembered in the names like Bhagat Singh, Surya Sen, Netaji Subhas and - the wisest of all, by the failure of the others - Mahatma Gandhi.

On casting a nostalgic glance on his past years, having known some of the "most intriguing personalities of contemporary history" like Lajpat Rai, Enver Pasha, Borodin, Molotov, Bukharin, Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky and Mao-tse-Tung, M.N. Roy wrote: "These are great men; Jatinda was a good man,

and I have still to find a better... Good men are seldom given a place in the galaxy of the great. It will continue to be so until goodness is recognised as the measure of genuine greatness."[24]

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NOTES

1. Foreword by R.C. Majumdar to Two Great Indian Revolutionaries, Firma KLM, Calcutta, 1966.
2. First Spark of Revolution, A.C. Guha, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1971, pp.393-394.
3. Auston Chamberlain Papers, P.O. 370, File281 2495/1915/13 3092.
4. Hardinge Papers, No. 77, Vol. V.
5. Biplaber Bali, Chandernagore, 1923 (proscribed in India).
6. Galpa-bharati, "Bipalbi Bangla", Calcutta, Oct. 1951.
7. Resurgent India, Sisirkumar Mitra, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1963, p.367.
8. Dvitiya svadhinata sangram, Bhupendranath Datta, Calcutta, 1949, p. 168.
9. Hardinge Papers, Book 117, No. 5.
10. " " Book 81, Vol. II, No. 231.
11. Amar dekha biplab o biplabi, Motilal Ray, Calcutta, 1957.
12. First Spark..., (Cf No.2), p.163.
13. Sri Aurobindo on Himself, Pondicherry, 1972, p.22.
14. Independent India: "Jatin Mukherjee", Feb. 27, 1949, p.91.
15. Biplabi Jibanor Smriti, Jadugopal Mukherjee, 1956, p.631.
16. Sri Aurobindo.. (Cf No.13), p.22.
17. I.B. Records/1915: India Office Library, London.
18. op.cit. M.N. Roy.
19. Notes by Molinikanto Kar, present during M.N. Roy's meeting with Jatin Mukherjee.

20. Biplabi Jibaner .. (Cf No.15), p.412.

21. First Spark ... (Cf No.2), p.362.

22. Two Great (Cf No.1), p. 204.

23. The stone-symbol of Shiva (Linga).

24. op.cit. by M.N. Roy.

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